

# The In-between Expression: Interpreting the Ambiguity of Islamic Culture in Bolaang Mongondow, North Sulawesi

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## Abstract

This article interprets the encounters between various elements—Islam and rites, *syarak* and custom, and the profane and sacred—in the development of Islam in Bolaang Mongondow, North Sulawesi. The interpretation is based on the theoretical framework of cultural ambiguity. By exploring the tolerance of ambiguity, compromise solutions, and divergent meanings, this study aims to reveal religious expressions that embody an "in-between" state. Utilizing a literature study approach with cultural and historical perspectives, the findings indicate that the tolerance of ambiguity allows Islam and local rites to coexist in this "in-between" expression. The integration of *syarak* and custom in the development of Islam in Bolaang Mongondow also highlights this "in-between" expression, adhering to the principle that customs contravening *syarak* are abandoned, while those not contravening are maintained. Additionally, the carving of *thayyibah* words in Islamic art in Bolaang Mongondow illustrates the divergent meanings between the profane and sacred. Ultimately, the encounters between these different elements coexist within the "in-between" expression, uniting them into a singular Islamic cultural expression.

**Keywords:** *Islam Bolaang Mongondow, Islamization of Nusantara, Cultural Ambiguity, Religion and Culture.*

### **Abstrak**

*Artikel ini menginterpretasikan pertemuan antara berbagai elemen— Islam dan ritual, syarak dan adat, serta yang profan dan sakral— dalam perkembangan Islam di Bolaang Mongondow, Sulawesi Utara. Interpretasi ini didasarkan pada kerangka teori ambiguitas budaya. Dengan mengeksplorasi toleransi terhadap ambiguitas, solusi kompromi, dan makna yang berbeda, studi ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap ekspresi keagamaan yang mewujudkan keadaan "di antara". Menggunakan pendekatan studi literatur dengan perspektif budaya dan sejarah, temuan menunjukkan bahwa toleransi terhadap ambiguitas memungkinkan Islam dan ritual lokal untuk hidup berdampingan dalam ekspresi "di antara" ini. Integrasi syarak dan adat dalam perkembangan Islam di Bolaang Mongondow juga menyoroti ekspresi "di antara" ini, dengan mematuhi prinsip bahwa adat yang bertentangan dengan syarak ditinggalkan, sementara yang tidak bertentangan dipertahankan. Selain itu, ukiran kata-kata thayyibah dalam seni Islam di Bolaang Mongondow menggambarkan makna yang berbeda antara yang profan dan sakral. Pada akhirnya, pertemuan antara elemen-elemen yang berbeda ini dapat hidup berdampingan dalam ekspresi "di antara", menyatukan mereka ke dalam satu ekspresi budaya Islam.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Islam Bolaang Mongondow, Islamisasi Nusantara, Ambiguitas Budaya, Agama dan Budaya.*

### **Introduction**

Bolaang Mongondow (Raya) is a region in North Sulawesi with a predominantly Muslim population. Islamic expression of Muslim people in this area, both historically and presently, reveals a blend of diverse elements that coexist harmoniously. These elements include Islam and local rites, syarak (Islamic law) and local customs, and the sacred and the profane. Rather than resisting or excluding any element, these encounters foster a unique form of cultural ambiguity.

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This cultural ambiguity, characterized by tolerated ambiguity, compromise solutions, and divergent meanings (Bauer, 2021; Schafer, 2021), arises from the historical context of Islam's arrival and development in Nusantara. When Islam reached Nusantara, it encountered existing cultures and belief systems (Nasir, 2019). Islamic spreaders, recognizing the cultural landscape, adapted their approach to accommodate local customs and traditions (Amin & Tanggok, 2022; Fuadi et al., 2024; Thahir, 2021). This process, often referred to as penetration pacifique (Karim, 2018) or gradual Islamization (McAmis, 2002; Anshori et al., 2021), allowed for a non-violent, culturally sensitive integration of Islam into local society.

This article aims to interpret expressions of cultural ambiguity among Bolaang Mongondow Muslims. Ambiguity here does not signify confusion or instability but rather a plurality of elements that coexist within a single expression. According to Bauer (2021), cultural ambiguity allows for different elements to exist side by side without conflict, forming a unique social expression. Schafer (2021) further explains that cultural ambiguity enables the coexistence of disparate truth claims in the interest of peaceful coexistence. In the context of this study, the encounters between Islam and local rites, *syarak* and custom, and the sacred and the profane in Bolaang Mongondow Islam do not lead to resistance or exclusion but rather foster a state of cultural ambiguity. This coexistence, referred to as an “in-between expression,” allows diverse elements to exist side by side.

Bolaang Mongondow Muslims demonstrate a nuanced approach to cultural ambiguity, both tolerating and resisting it (Harnish,

2021). This tolerance allows for a harmonious blend of Islamic teachings and local traditions, ensuring a rich cultural heritage while adhering to Islamic principles. The extent of this tolerance depends on various factors, including social group dynamics, emotional responses, and the specific manifestation of cultural ambiguity (Bauer, 2021). For instance, the conscience and emotions of Bolaang Mongondow Muslims influence their acceptance of local rites within an Islamic framework.

This tolerance of ambiguity often leads to compromise solutions that bridge the gap between different elements within the in-between expression (Bauer, 2021). These solutions can range from juxtaposition to the dominance of one element over another. In the case of *syarak* and custom, Bolaang Mongondow Muslims have found a compromise by viewing customs as the wisdom of ancestral heritage, thus not resisting *syarak* as a core religious doctrine.

Beyond tolerance and compromise, cultural ambiguity also manifests in divergent meanings assigned to texts, actions, and objects. These divergent meanings (Bauer, 2021) emerge when an element has the potential for multiple interpretations. For example, the Kabela and Hamunse, with their incorporation of holy words (*thayyibah*), exemplify the divergent meanings between the profane and the sacred.

Drawing upon the theoretical framework of cultural ambiguity, the notion of the in-between expression is constructed. By examining the conditions of tolerance, compromise, and divergent meanings, we can better understand the complex

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interplay between Islam and local culture in Bolaang Mongondow Muslim expressions. This study aims to answer some research questions: How does the tolerance of ambiguity in the encounter between Islam and local rites contribute to the development of Islam in Bolaang Mongondow? How do compromise solutions reconcile syarak and custom within Bolaang Mongondow Muslim society? And how do these solutions manifest in everyday life?

## **Literature Review**

There have been numerous previous works that explored Islam in Bolaang Mongondow (Raya), North Sulawesi. Some of those are the works of Kosel (2010) and Manoppo et al. (2020). One of focuses in Kosel's study was the dialectic between scriptural religion (Islam) and traditional local religion (rites). The study found that, "...elements of the traditional religion and local practices initially related to Islam but incompatible with the official understanding on Islam in Indonesia..." (Kosel, 2010). Compared to the present study, Kosel's work was more focused on reading the processes of rationalization and de-rationalization of religion in the history of Islam in Bolaang Mongondow, whereas this article focuses on cultural ambiguity in the Muslim practices in Bolaang Mongondow. Moreover, Kosel's opinion asserted that the Bolaang Mongondow people in their local understandings exerted a repository of alternative religious truths (Kosel, 2010). Meanwhile, the notion of in-between expression in this article becomes a narrative that continues the explanation about the form of alternative religious expression that develops in practicing Islam in Bolaang Mongondow.

Manoppo et al. (2020) explained the processes of Islamization or religious conversion in Bolaang Mongondow society. They divided the phases of Islamization becoming in the pre-Islam phase, the phase of Islamization early days since the 16th century, the phase of Islamization in the developing era in the 19th century, and the phase of Islamization in the end era of the 20th century. (Manoppo et al., 2020). Differing from their work, this article is not an effort to expose the process of Islamization but rather more an effort to interpret the expression of cultural ambiguity in the Muslim society of Bolaang Mongondow. Differing focus also brought out differences in interpreting contexts, if Manoppo et al. looked at the existence of polarization between religionism and animism (local rites) in the pre-Islam phase (Manoppo et al., 2020), the author constructed non-polarization of notion about the in-between expression that makes co-existing the different elements; Islam and rite, *syarak* and custom, and profane and sacred, which occurred in the time the Bolaang Mongondow people have been Islamic believers.

Abdul's monograph (2022) on Islamization in Bolaang Mongondow builds upon previous research in this topic. While it provides a comprehensive overview of the lengthy Islamization process, it primarily focuses on historical discourses about Islam in the region, including the encounter between Islam and local culture. In contrast, this article delves into the concept of the in-between expression, exploring the coexistence of Islam and local culture in Bolaang Mongondow, a topic not extensively addressed in Abdul's work.

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The discourse of Islam in Nusantara is not a novel concept. Previous studies by Karim (2018), Wijaya (2011), Wulandari (2019), Azka et al. (2024), and Schafer (2021) have contributed to this field. Karim (2018) emphasizes the balanced development of religion and culture in Nusantara, arguing that they mutually influence each other. He highlights the importance of culture as a guide for religious expression and vice versa. However, Karim's focus lies on the broader contribution of Islam to Nusantara, while this article delves into specific cultural expressions within the Islamic context.

Wijaya (2011) on the other hand, interpreted the Muslim cultural expression in Nusantara by highlighting the wrestling between ideal Islam and historic Islam. According to him, Islam Nusantara has to be autonomous in interpreting its Islamic expression. This is a way to assess Nusantara culture as a legitimation to formulate Islam typically Nusantara. (Wijaya, 2011). In this case, the in-between expression, which becomes one notion in this article, is part of the discourse of historic Islam in Nusantara. Differing from Wijaya's work (2011) was more reading about the wrestling between ideal Islam and historic Islam, this article is more highlighting the aspect of cultural ambiguity in the expression of historic Islam and did not read the epistemology of Islam Nusantara.

Wulandari (2019) explores the integration of religion and culture in Java. She examines the preparation of a king in Yogyakarta, focusing on the encounter between Babad Ngayogyakarta HB IV-V (SB 169) and cultural traditions. Wulandari concludes that the ideal Javanese leader combines a strong Islamic character

with local wisdom, highlighting the importance of both elements in shaping a ruler's character. However, her work does not delve into the cultural ambiguity that arises from the intersection of religion and local culture.

Azka et al. (2024) investigate the harmonization of tradition and Islam in Luwu society, South Sulawesi. They argue that religion and local traditions can coexist peacefully without infringing upon Islamic law. The practice of Maccera Tasi, often misunderstood as polytheistic, is actually part of Islamic expressions in preserving local culture through a process of religious and cultural assimilation. While their work shares the idea of religious and cultural coexistence with this article, it focuses on the legal argument of practicing local traditions within an Islamic framework, rather than exploring the cultural ambiguity that arises from this encounter.

Schafer (2021) highlights the diversity of Islamic practices and beliefs in Indonesia. He employs the theoretical framework of cultural ambiguity to understand the plurality of Islam Nusantara. Schafer argues that pluralism has been a norm in Islamic history for centuries. Although Schafer's work shares the use of cultural ambiguity with this article, it focuses on the broader diversity of Islamic expressions, rather than the specific encounter between different elements within a single expression.

Amidst these previous studies, this article positions itself within the discourse of Islam in Bolaang Mongondow and Nusantara. It examines the cultural ambiguity that arises from the encounter between various elements, such as Islam and local rites, syarak



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and custom, and the sacred and profane. This article contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex and dynamic relationship between religion and culture in Islamic societies.

## **Method**

This article is a study of literature about the cultural ambiguity or the meeting between Islam and local culture in the Muslim society of Bolaang Mongondow, with the cultural and historical approach. The author used the approaches of culture (anthropology) and history to do this study of literature. This is a use of the interdisciplinary approach, where the approaches of anthropology and history can be mutually penetrability and permeability (Abdullah, 2014), so it can be more whole in explaining the cultural expression of society, especially about the meeting between Islam and local culture in the Muslim society of Bolaang Mongondow.

Data in this article were collected through the related literature; books and journal articles, which explained the meeting between Islam and local culture in the Muslim society of Bolaang Mongondow. To support and strengthen data in this study, the author also collected cultural and historical data. To get cultural data, the author participated in Islamic tradition and did interviews with the cultural expert and practitioner or performer. To get historical data, the author explored historical document and pictures. Those data were interpreted based on the historical-cultural approach and theoretical framework of cultural ambiguity (as explained in the introduction of this article). Through this way, the author wrote the notion in this article about

the in-between expression that meets the expressions of Islam and local culture in the Muslim society of Bolaang Mongondow, North Sulawesi.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Between Islam and Local Rite: Tolerating the Cultural Ambiguity**

In Bolaang Mongondow, some Muslim communities continue to practice pre-Islamic local rites alongside their Islamic faith. For instance, Muslims in Tuduaog Village (Bilalang district) routinely perform the Motayok ritual to treat the sick. This local rite is deeply embedded within the village's Muslim society (Mokoginta; 04/12/2024). According to Bauer (2021), cultural ambiguity allows for the coexistence of diverse elements within a society. In Tuduaog, Muslim residents demonstrate tolerance for cultural ambiguity by simultaneously practicing Islam and upholding ancestral local rites. This coexistence creates a unique blend of Islamic and local traditions, shaping a distinct Muslim identity for the Bolaang Mongondow people of Tuduaog.

This blending of Islam and local rites has historical roots in Bolaang Mongondow. King Loloda Mokoagow—a king who governed the Bolaang Mongondow Kingdom around 1653-1693 CE (Dunnebie, 1949)—had accepted Islam but kept continuing the practices of local rites. (Manoppo et al., 2020). Figure 1 shows the tomb of King Mokoagow.

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Tolerance of ambiguity cannot be separated from the awareness and emotions of society or an individual in considering differences.

(Bauer, 2021). In the case of Loloda Mokoagow, as a king, he had the bonds of conscience and emotion toward his ancestors, making it difficult to leave the traditions (local rites) of his ancestor heritage totality, on the other hand, he also had an awareness that he had consciously accepted Islam.

This condition led the king to adopt a tolerant attitude towards ambiguity, where he was a follower of Islam who continued to carry out local rituals that had become sacred traditions in his kingdom.



*Figure 1. Resting Place of King Loloda Mokoagow  
(Source: Author's Documentation)*

In the current context, the motivation of ancestral heritage also becomes a motive for tolerating the ambiguity between Islam and local rituals.

In Tuduaog, one of the motives why Muslims perform Motayok is because this ritual is considered a heritage passed down through generations from the ancestors. In addition, the belief that there are diseases that can only be treated with the Motayok ritual is also a motive to tolerate ambiguity that makes Muslims continue to perform this ritual. (Mokoginta; 04/12/2024).

The ancestral heritage motives has colored the local customary practices of the Muslim community of Bolaang Mongondow. As well as in other Islamic customs. (Abdul, 2021).

The peaceful process of Islamization in the archipelago, makes it possible to create tolerance for ambiguity and promote conditions in which two different elements can coexist (Schafer, 2021). The spreaders of Islam did not emphasize the totality of Islam for society as ordinary Muslims, the main thing is that Islam is accepted first and then develops through a gradual process (McAmis, 2002; Siraj, 2012). In this case, the process of Islamization in the archipelago occurred on the basis of a continuous process (Budiwanti, 2014), and this condition also occurred in Islamization in Bolaang Mongondow (Kosel, 2010).

In the 19th century CE, which was the period of mass Islamization in Bolaang Mongondow, when the majority of the population in the area was Muslim (Abdul, 2022), local rituals still had a modest place in the cultural expression of the Muslim community. (Manoppo et al., 2020). Many of those who had embraced Islam continued to practice local rituals. In 1866, when Protestant missionaries, Wilken and Schwarz, arrived in Bolaang Mongondow, they saw many Muslims participating in the local

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Monibi ritual to bring prosperity to the village, heal the sick, make livestock healthy, and fertilize crops. (Wilken & Schwarz, 1867). It is explained that, since the Islamization of Bolaang Mongondow, the Muslim community has tolerated cultural ambiguity in the encounter between Islamic practices and local rituals.

Slowly, the Bolaang Mongondow community began to get religious rationalization, where in their awareness as Muslims they began to question the traditional rites before Islam. A separation between practicing Islamic teachings and traditional rites is a non-ambiguous condition. Some choose to limit their religious expression in Islamic practices and abandon traditional rites, and some choose to continue to practice traditional rites as a legacy in areas that do not conflict with the nature of Islam. Both conditions are evident in the lives of Bolaang Mongondow Muslims today.



*Figure 2.* Practicing the local rite by Bolaang Mongondow Muslim  
(Source: a Picture from the Book of Hamri Manoppo et al.  
(Manoppo et al., 2020))

Muslims on the southern coast of Bolaang Mongondow generally no longer perform local traditional rituals. In Nunuk

Village, the traditional ritual they call Bagoini is no longer performed by Muslims. If it still exists, it is rarely performed.

(Paputungan, 28, 2021). In Pinolosian Village, through the stories of the elders and the Sigi's location which surrounds the village, we learn that in the past, Muslims in this village also performed local traditional rituals, but now they no longer do so. However, the expression of "in between" is not completely lost in the cultural expression of Bolaang Mongondow Muslims on the south coast.

The elements of the local rite in the form of ancestor worship still remain in the collective memory of the Bolaang Mongondow people in this area. Generally the Muslim community in this area still imagines the sacred powers of their ancestors who are named as the *Bogani* or *Mogoguyang*. This shows that the elements of local rite still have a place in expression of the muslims on the southern coast of Bolaang Mongondow.

In Bilalang or the Bolaang Mongondow highland, especially in Tuduaog Village, many Muslims still practice the local rite particularly *Motayok* to treat people who are sick and can be treated by this rite. In 2023, Muslims in this village performed a large rite of *Motayok* for 24 hours to treat a person in this village. (Mokoginta; 04/12/2024). This shows that there is an expression of the in-between from the Muslim society who still carry out traditional rituals as inherited from their ancestors. So, in the meeting of Islam and local rite, they do not choose to ignore one of the two, but they choose an expression between the two; remaining Muslims who practice Islamic teaching and

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maintaining the rituals inherited from their ancestors which for them do not contradict with Islam in their understanding. This is the in-between expression that has become a local rite so that it can co-exist with practicing Islamic teaching.

In the Muslim society of Bolaang Mongondow today, some Muslims continue to practice the local rite as an ancestor heritage, and others do not practice the local rite again but still imagine the sacred of ancestors (*Bogani*).

In this case, Islam developed in Bolaang Mongondow based on a peace process, which allows for tolerance of ambiguity, not punching cultural expressions that require a path without ambiguity, but rather giving rise to the in-between expression that bring Islam together with elements of local rite as an ancestor heritage in conditions that are able to co-exist side by side.

### **Between Syarak and Custom: Compromise Solution and Common Good in the Cultural Ambiguity**

Along with the entry and development of Islam in Bolaang Mongondow, there was also a meeting between *syarak* (Islamic doctrine) and local customs. The meeting between *syarak* and custom indeed is a common condition in the process of Islamization in various regions of Nusantara, especially in communities that already have established customs. This meeting will be able to find conditions of the in-between expressions through compromise solutions. Forms of compromise solutions can happen in a condition of juxtaposition

or enlarging one element that is more dominant than the other. (Bauer, 2021).

In some Muslim communities of Nusantara, the compromise solution between *syarak* and custom takes condition of making Islam as a more dominant determining factor than custom as culture. This compromise resolution has given birth to the principles of customs based on *syarak*. Such as principles are seen in the societies of Minangkabau; *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi kitabullah* (Tungkagi, 2017; Aziz et al., 2020), Jambi; *adat bersendi syarak, syarak bersendi kitabullah* (Rachman & Rahman, 2017), Sumbawa; *adat barenti lako syarak, syarak barenti lako kitabullah* (Dianto, 2020), Ternate; *adat matoto agama, agama matoto kitabullah* (Zakry, 2020), Gorontalo; *adati hulahulaa to syaraa, syaraa hulahulaa to Quruani* (Amin, 2017; Rahmawati & Yahiji, 2021), etc.

The compromise resolution between *syarak* and custom in the Islamization of Bolaang Mongondow happened somewhat differently from the condition based on the principle of ‘custom depending on *syarak*. Several times, the author found the customary principle of *adat popodoyon kon syarak, syarak popodoyon kon kitabullah* (custom based on *syarak*, and *syarak* based on the holy book), nevertheless so far the author has not found yet the history that explains the process of reformulation of custom based on *syarak* in the history of Islam in Bolaang Mongondow. Moreover, looking at the customary expression of Muslim society in Bolaang Mongondow today, the customs at this time basically just continue the customs that existed before Islam. This statement is suitable with the explanations of



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Mokoginta and Bahansubuh, the *budayawan* (cultural experts) of Bolaang Mongondow, that the custom of Bolaang Mongondow already existed before Islam entered in this area. (Mokoginta & Bahansubuh; 01/01/2022).

In this case, the Islamization in Bolaang Mongondow—even though it has big influences from Islam Gorontalo and Ternate with the principle of custom based on *syarak* (Abdul, 2022), it does not make the society do the reformulation of custom based on *syarak*. The encounter of *syarak* and custom in Bolaang Mongondow raised the compromise solution of not making *syarak* as a hinge or basis to custom but rather gathering custom with *syarak*. According to Mokoginta, in Bolaang Mongondow none of the reformulation of new customs based on *syarak*, however, there was action to maintain customs that were not contrary to *syarak*. (Mokoginta; 01/01/2022). So, the compromise solution emerged in the customary principle that the customs are practiced with *syarak* without re-formulating customs based on *syarak*.

This compromise solution resulted in an awareness to keep custom but not contravening *syarak*, hence emerging a principle of the in-between expression in which the custom contravening *syarak* was abandoned and custom being compatible *syarak* was maintained and developed. (Mokoginta; 01/01/2022). In this case, the Bolaang Mongondow council of custom (*dewan adat*) and *jiou* (local Islamic leaders) did not make reformulation of custom with the principle of *adat popodoyon kon syarak, syarak popodoyon kon kitabullah*, as is the case in other Muslim societies in Nusantara, but they became *syarak* to filter the

customs that were maintained and those that were abandoned in the religious status of Bolaang Mongondow people as Islamic believers. (Mokoginta; 01/01/2022).

The compromise solution that combines custom with *syarak* cannot be separated from the awareness that the religion is more important, nonetheless, the custom is also a legacy of our ancestors that has to be maintained.

A condition of the in-between expression where the custom is practiced with *syarak*, can be seen in the life of Bolaang Mongondow Muslims. In the villages of Bolaang Mongondow, people always have the *jiou* as the symbol of *syarak* and *dewan adat* as the symbol of custom. In every practicing Islamic tradition, *jiou* and *dewan adat* always walk together. Such as, in the tradition of *Mintahang* or *Ba-aruwah* (the *tahlilan* in the version of Islam Bolaang Mongondow), before *Ba-arwah* is begun with practicing *syarak* in the form of *zikr* and prayer in Arabic by *jiou*, first it is begun with *Mongingsingok* (Palakum; 21/12/2023), an introduction of prayer in the customary language (Mongondow language) by *dewan adat*. (Manoppo; 07/01/2024). So, the customary language (custom) is read into the *tahlilan* (*syarak*).



Figure 3. Practicing the *Ba-aruwah* tradition by Bolaang Mongondow Muslim (Source: Author's Documentation)

In the in-between expression that compromises *syarak* and custom, the principles of the common good are the compromise solutions that meet the cultural ambiguity. (Bauer, 2021). In this case, the aspects of custom that are not contrary to *syarak* but instead compatible based on the principle of common good become an interface of compromise solution between *syarak* and custom. So, even though Islam has been a religion to the Bolaang Mongondow people, the customs can be maintained based on the common good in the principle that the customs not contravening *syarak* are maintained and developed.

For example, the custom of *Mogama'* is a part of the steps in the wedding tradition based on the custom of Bolaang Mongondow. The *Mogama'* custom is done after marriage based on *syarak* (Islam).

The Bolaang Mongondow people in general feels that they are completely married if their marriage is based on *syarak* and custom. (Bahansubuh; 01/01/2022). In this case, because the

*Mogama'* custom is not contrary to *syarak*, and by practicing it, the Bolaang Mongondow people truly feels that their marriage is done perfectly; *syarak* and custom, so this custom is maintained, because basically not contravening with *syarak* and instead supporting the *ikhtiar* (effort) of marriage commitment as strong bond in Islam. This shows the existence of the common good in the form of *ikhtiar* to strengthen the marriage relations, it is a common good being the compromise solution of *syarak* and custom to embody in the in-between expression.

On the contrary, when the custom contravenes *syarak*, nothing common good can connect the both, the Bolaang Mongondow Muslims prioritize *syarak* as religion. (Mokoginta; 01/01/2022). Such as the habit of slaughtering and consuming pork in some rites or traditions (Wilken and Schwarz, 1867), have been forsaken by the Bolaang Mongondow people in their status as an Islamic believer. Now, there are no Muslim people in Bolaang Mongondow consuming pork be it for the purpose of rites or something else.

The compromise solution in the form of gathering custom with *syarak* in the development of Islam in Bolaang Mongondow brings out the in-between expression that meets *syarak* and custom. It makes the Muslim people of Bolaang Mongondow become the customary Muslim. Where, being Muslim of Bolaang Mongondow besides expressing Islamic religion, in their life as ethnic of Bolaang Mongondow also practice customs that are compatible with *syarak* in line of the common good.

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## **Between Profane and Sacred: Divergent Meanings in Expressing the Cultural Ambiguity**

Among collections of Wereld Museum in Rotterdam, there is a *Kabela*, which was made before 1905 CE, that has the motif of *thayyibah* words (good words); *laa Allah laa Allah*. Maybe, it is to say *tahlil*; *laa ilaaha illallah* (no God besides Allah). (Wereld Museum; 01/01/1926).

*Kabela* is a box. At this time, a *Kabela* usually becomes the main property in the *Kabela* dance; a traditional dance of Bolaang Mogondow to pick up guests (Abdul, 2022). This is a famous traditional dance in Bolaang Mongondow. We can see this traditional dance using the property of *Kabela* box in many celebrations in this area.

In the past, *Kabela* was a box to keep *sirih* (betel), *pinang* (areca), and *cengkeh* (clove). Those fruits become the dishes for guests in the local tradition of Bolaang Mongondow. *Kabela* was also a storage of treasure. (Sabunge, 2019). Accordingly, in the explanation of the catalog of Wereld Museum, this box (*Kabela*) is explained as *sirih-doo*s (box to *sirih*). (Wereld Museum; 01/01/1926). Commonly, a *Kabela* has the motif of coco palm and geometry in the form of stripes of triangles, rectangles, and flowers, however, in the collection of Wereld Museum a *Kabela* has the motif of *thayyibah* words.



Figure 4. A *Kabela* box with the motif of *thayyibah* words (Source: Collection of Wereld Museum Rotterdam)

This shows the existence of art expression pouring sacred values of holy words in Islam into a *Kabela* box that is a profane item. This ambiguity between profane and sacred brings out a *Kabela* having a non-common motif and also carries meaning to *Kabela* in a condition of the in-between expression from profane item being an item with the sacred element because of some holy words.

Condition of divergent meanings includes the cultural ambiguity that unites the different meanings in one expression of cultural ambiguity. (Bauer, 2021). In this case, a *Kabela* with the motif of the *thayyibah* words includes an item that expresses a condition of divergent meanings; as a profane item with a sacred meaning. So, there is a meeting between the elements of profane and sacred being one Islamic art expression. This brings out a condition of the in-between expression where a profane item has sacred meaning.

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Besides the *Kabela* box, the in-between expression that reconciles profane and sacred in the Islamic art of Bolaang Mongondow also is visible in a *Hamunse* or *Hamsei* that has the motif of sacred words. *Hamunse* is part of the customary clothes of Bolaang Mongondow women, which usually has a variety of yellow decorations to symbols of rice or gold and green decorations to symbol of fertility. (Amabon, n.d.). Commonly, *Hamunse* has no motif of holy words, but the author found a picture of *Hamunse*, made around 1932, that has the motif of *thayyibah* words. (Tagela; 08/10/2020).



Figure 5. A *Hamunse* with the motif of *thayyibah* words (Source: Thelma Ulola's Picture from the Post in *Historia Bolaang Mongondow Raya (Boelang En Mongondou)* (Tagela; 08/10/2020))

Figure 5 above depicts a *Hamunse* with Arabic letters; *laa ilaaha ilallah muhammad arrasulullah*, and the name from owner of this *Hamunse*; *tutu damopolii*. This *Hamunse* is saved by Thelma

Ulola in Motoboi Kecil; she is a descendant of Tutu Damopolii. The green color shows the use of this *Hamunse* for the customary clothes of Bolaang Mongondow women. (Tagela; 05/12/2024).

Basically, *Hamunse* is only a profane item, it is worn by women of Bolaang Mongondow, however, when it was carved with the *thayyibah* words; *laa ilaaha ilallah...*, making it has a condition of divergent meanings; on one side it is part of custom clothes for women and on another side carving *tahlil* brings out a sacred nuance (religiousness). Accordingly, *Hamunse* with the motif of *thayyibah* words is a form of the in-between expression; as the clothes it is just a customary attribute but the sacred words give the sacred elements. The condition of a sacred item that is actually profane, such as this *Hamunse* with the motif of *tahlil*, is unethical to be carried entering the toilet as the other *Hamunse*, because there is already a sacred condition in it. In the belief of local people, it is unethical to carry items with the motif of holy words to places that are not appropriate.

The encounter between profane and sacred in the art expression of *Kabela* and *Hamunse* raises the condition of divergent meanings. Here, we find the in-between expression of profane and sacred being one art expression of Bolaang Mongondow Islam. It is an effort to manifest the belief toward God even though in a profane item. The expression between profane and sacred explains that there is a thin barrier between profane and sacred in the culture of Bolaang Mongondow's Muslims. Profane items can become sacred by sprinkling sacred elements. Accordingly, the Bolaang Mongondow people do in their daily life activities with sacred meanings to consider, even throw rice



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in the afternoon or cut nails in the evening for example, requires consideration on whether it is sacred or not. .

This in-between expression of the profane and the sacred results in the loss of barriers between the profane and the sacred in the expression of cultural ambiguity in the Muslim community of Bolaang Mongondow.

It is also a way for Muslim people in Bolaang Mongondow to keep finding sacred meaning and present feeling to God's existence even though in a profane object.

## **Conclusion**

The tolerance of cultural ambiguity enables the coexistence of Islam and local rites within the in-between expression. This expression allows Bolaang Mongondow Muslims to maintain their ancestral heritage while developing an Islamic identity. Many Bolaang Mongondow Muslims still practice local rites and believe in the power of their ancestral spirits (*bogani* or *mogoguyang*).

The interplay between syarak (Islamic law) and custom in Bolaang Mongondow also contributes to the in-between expression. The compromise solution involves upholding customs that do not contradict syarak while abandoning those that do. This approach allows Muslims to maintain their customs as an ancestral heritage without compromising their religious beliefs. The common good serves as a unifying principle in this compromise, leading to the emergence of a distinct Muslim identity that blends syarak and custom.

The inclusion of *thayyibah* (holy) words in Bolaang Mongondow art creates a condition of divergent meanings between the profane and the sacred. For example, the Kabela and Hamunse, adorned with motifs of holy words, blur the lines between the two. This in-between expression suggests that profane objects can attain sacred significance for Bolaang Mongondow Muslims.

This study demonstrates that the encounter between different elements does not always lead to resistance but can result in the emergence of in-between expressions. These expressions unite diverse elements within an Islamic cultural framework. In Nusantara, in-between expressions enrich the religious lives of Muslims. For Bolaang Mongondow Muslims, these expressions offer a way to maintain their ancestral heritage while embracing Islam. They can even discover sacred meaning in the profane, deepening their connection to God.

This notion contributes to the discourse on Islam and local culture in Nusantara. While this article primarily focuses on a literary study of cultural ambiguity, it highlights the potential for further research into Islamic expressions within Bolaang Mongondow Muslim society.

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## **Interviews**

Interview with Chairun Mokoginta, a cultural expert of Bolaang Mongondow, 01/01/2022.

Interview with Gunawan Mokoginta, a performer of *Motayok* rite, 04/12/2024.

Interview with Hamri Manoppo, a cultural expert of Bolaang Mongondow, 07/01/2024.

Interview with Hasman Bahansubuh, a cultural expert of Bolaang Mongondow, 01/01/2022.

Interview with Laudjin Palakum, a *Dewan Adat* of Bolaang Mongondow in Pinolosian, 21/12/2023.

Interview with Rahman T. Paputungan, a *Sangadi* in Nunuk Village 1987-1999, 28/11/2021.

Interview with Sumitro Tagela, an activist of culture and history of Bolaang Mongondow, 05/12/2024.